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DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

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South Korea: Where Does Chun Go From Here?

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Summary

President Chun Doo Hwan faces a political challenge over the next several months that would test even a leader considerably more skilled in political maneuvering. The return of Kim Dae Jung and the strong electoral showing of a newly organized opposition party have led to increased demands for political reform that will not be easily sidetracked. These developments also have prompted some key leaders in the military, his most crucial backers, to question Chun's leadership and, we believe, to press him to regain the political initiative.

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Chun has tried to appear conciliatory in the immediate aftermath of the election, but pressure to act decisively will build both on him and his opponents over the coming weeks. The opposition will seek to consolidate its gains, while Chun, under military pressure, will seek to dictate the substance and pace of political debate and keep Kim Dae Jung's influence in check. Confrontation is not inevitable, but the issues and players are all in place to initiate the cycle of overreaction and instability that has been endemic to the politics of Korea.

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This memorandum was prepared by Korea Branch, Northeast Asia Division, Office of East Asian Analysis. Comments and queries are welcome and may be addressed to Chief, Korea Branch

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Pressures on Chun Mount

Chun showed signs of increasing preoccupation with his own position even before exiled dissident Kim Dae Jung returned to Korea on 8 February and the newly-formed New Korea Democratic Party (NKDP), which campaigned on an anti-Chun platform, made its unexpectedly strong electoral showing four days later. Chun's instinct to fight back has been underscored by the return to the Blue House since last fall of several hardline advisers, Huh Moon Doo chief among them. Both the resurgence of student demonstrations despite an experiment with campus liberalization and the pressures created by North Korea's call for multiparty talks also have probably contributed to Chun's sense of deepening problems. [REDACTED]

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Now facing a parliamentary opposition led by the NKDP as well as the reinvolvement of dissidents Kim Dae Jung and Kim Young Sam in politics, Chun, we believe, sees definite restrictions on his ability to set the course of political development. Halfway through his term and apparently no closer to gaining popular acceptance than when he became president, Chun faces renewed agitation for fundamental political reforms -- such as allowing direct election of the president -- that threatens his orchestration of a transfer of power when his term ends in 1988 or any hopes he may have of extending his rule. [REDACTED]

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Even pressures for more modest concessions, such as lifting the legal bans on political activities by the two Kims, take on added significance because of a belief among top military leaders that Seoul has already been too lenient. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] At the time the death sentence for Kim was commuted in 1981, a number of senior officers strongly objected. Chun's handling of Kim -- even more than the opposition's election showing -- has caused these senior officers to question the President's political acumen. [REDACTED]

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Despite occasional problems and scandals over the past four years, we have not seen senior Army officers seriously waver in their backing for Chun. This reflects in part Chun's attention to the military, his success in strengthening the security relationship with the United States, his close ties to the inner circle of the Army officer corps, and his assignment of sensitive command positions to loyal proteges. [REDACTED]

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Seeking a Workable Strategy

The crux of Chun's problem is how to deal with the new opposition lineup under the leadership of the NKDP. In our view, prospects for political stability will depend largely on whether the opposition and Chun can come to a working accommodation that avoids the use of tension-raising tactics such as mass demonstrations or drastic on-campus crackdowns that, given the Korean predisposition for bitter confrontation and intense reaction, could easily get out of hand. [REDACTED]

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The new opposition's more moderate leaders, such as Kim Young Sam, might agree to forget the past in exchange for more open debate on South Korea's political future and a timetable for concrete reforms. But, we believe that Kim Dae Jung will be more difficult to deal with. He presumably recognizes the risks to himself of provoking a confrontation simply to cause trouble, but Kim does not believe he has a stake in helping Chun to steer a smooth course. [REDACTED]

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At this stage, we are not optimistic that Chun's conciliatory postelection statement or the recent cabinet changes signal a genuine commitment to a more liberal approach on his part. Chun's initial response to the election results suggests he is focusing more on reestablishing control than on setting an agenda. [REDACTED]

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External Issues on Hold

Domestic problems will preoccupy the government for some time and, because most decisionmaking responsibilities are concentrated in a tight inner circle of advisers to Chun, the handling of some important external issues will probably be colored by domestic concerns. In dealing with the North-South dialogue, in particular, Seoul will be more than usually suspicious that P'yongyang is interested only in capitalizing on events in the South.* Although Seoul will feel compelled for both domestic and international reasons to continue bilateral talks, it almost certainly will avoid major new initiatives. [redacted]

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On issues involving the United States, Seoul is unlikely to do more than pursue a holding action. Indeed, in the aftermath of the Kim Dae Jung arrival incident, we anticipate that Chun will go to great lengths to avoid being viewed once again by his domestic audience as bending to US pressure. Seoul may even use bilateral frictions and supposed affronts to its sovereignty to deflect criticism from itself. Pushing the US hard on guarantees that no more Hughes helicopters will find their way to North Korea and being more combative when issues such as Korean arms sales to Iran arise are two examples where such behavior may occur. [redacted]

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Nevertheless, Chun will want to keep on track his scheduled summit meeting in late April with President Reagan. He will be sensitive to North Korean propaganda and domestic criticism that he is currying Washington's favor, but he probably sees an increased need to demonstrate that he enjoys continuing US support, especially as he plays to his military backers. In fact, Chun's political position could be dealt a serious blow if the South Korean elite begins to perceive signs of US dissatisfaction with him. [redacted]

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*North Korean media have followed predictable lines in their treatment of Kim's return and the government's electoral upset. The 4 February announcement that President Chun would visit Washington in April also drew sharp criticism in the party newspaper. So far, however, the North appears to be taking pains to keep its options open on the dialogue. In fact, despite suspension of economic and humanitarian talks on the pretext of the Team Spirit military exercises, P'yongyang and Seoul have been in contact with one another using the hotline at Panmunjom. P'yongyang, however, does not reach a decision point on whether to return to the table until after the Team Spirit exercises; so we believe it will continue to keep a close watch on developments in the South. [redacted]

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[REDACTED]
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Potential Threats to Chun's Position

Apart from the potential risks posed by any perceived weakening of US confidence, several other developments could threaten his position:

- Large-scale street demonstrations in support of the demands of the new political opposition.
- Attempts by the opposition to open parliamentary debate on the Kwangju incident in 1980 and other issues that imply a direct challenge to Chun's legitimacy.
- Opposition efforts to build public support for faster movement in the North-South dialogue. [REDACTED]

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Such developments would probably generate military pressure on Chun to crack down, setting the stage for confrontation between government and opposition forces. Chances are better than even, in our view, that if Chun had to call on the Army to restore order, senior officers would take the opportunity to replace him with one of their own. [REDACTED]

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